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Federal Highway Administration Launches Major Study Into Causes of Motorcycle Crashes

FHWA, NHTSA, Oklahoma State University to Partner on Critical Research Endeavor

WASHINGTON, D.C. - FHWA will conduct an ambitious new study to better understand and prevent motorcycle crashes, Administrator Victor Mendez announced today.

Despite years of steadily improving highway safety and roadway fatalities at historic lows, motorcycle riders remain one of the highest-risk groups on America's roads. Nearly 5,300 motorcycle riders died in roadway crashes in 2008, accounting for 14 percent of all traffic fatalities, and 96,000 were injured.

"Having a better understanding of what causes these crashes will help us improve roadway safety for everyone," said Administrator Mendez. "Keeping people safe on America's roads is Secretary LaHood's top priority at the Department of Transportation."

The motorcycle crash causation study will be the federal government's first major in-depth analysis of motorcycle safety in nearly three decades. A provision in the "Safe, Accountable, Flexible, Efficient Transportation Equity Act: A Legacy for Users" (SAFETEA-LU) requires the study, which will be conducted by the FHWA in partnership with the Oklahoma State University.

The university's Oklahoma Transportation Center is one of the U.S. Department of Transportation's 10 National University Transportation Centers, and it receives federal grants to conduct transportation research.

"OSU is delighted to be the lead research institution for this important study," said Dr. Alan Tree, associate dean for research in OSU's College of Engineering, Architecture and Technology. "We expect very significant, scientifically valid results to emerge from this work and look forward to a very positive final outcome."

Researchers will evaluate data from hundreds of motorcycle crashes to help identify common factors - including road configurations, environmental conditions and rider experience. The study's focus is to look at how these factors may be affected by countermeasures that, if effectively implemented, will prevent motorcycle crashes or lessen the harm when they occur.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration conducted a pilot study to develop the protocols for the full-scale causation research. NHTSA also was responsible for the earlier motorcycle causation study, which was completed in 1981.

Between 1997 and 2008, motorcycle rider fatalities increased from 2,116 to 5,290 - a 150 percent jump, according to U.S. Department of Transportation's Fatality Analysis Reporting System. In 2008 alone, deaths due to motorcycle crashes rose by an estimated 2.2 percent while all other vehicle classes saw reductions in fatalities.

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